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STRATEGY ON THE ROCKS:
SUN TZU IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

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STRATEGY ON THE ROCKS: SUN TZU IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

Master Sun Tzu wiped the tears streaming from his eyes as he recovered from his third bout of vomiting that hour. He looked out over the railing at the churning South Atlantic and cursed the bobbing horizon and whatever evil djinn had made him accept the offer from Hong Kong-based Ch'i Consulting. It had actually sounded intriguing two months ago: in return for one lecture in some city named Stanley, the Master would receive a stack of dollars the height of an arrow – a longbow arrow, not a crossbow bolt. At the time, the mere thought of such wealth in return for mere words made Master Tzu glow. Now he was ashen. Why, in the name of heaven, had he not thought to ask where this Stanley was? By the time he had ascertained that one important fact about terrain, his signed contract had launched him off the edge of the world – the freezing edge, no less. The endless flight from Beijing to Buenos Aires, and then to Punta Arenas had been bad enough, even with the comely flight attendants in Business Class. But the inclement weather that had cancelled the scheduled flight to the Falklands and forced him onto this hellish barge – in the company of a group of boisterous and increasingly drunk Falklanders -- surely disproved the Communist's assertion that the gods have no sense of humor.

The Atlantic Conveyor II, a cargo ship named in honor of a vessel sunk by an Argentine Exocet missile during the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas conflict, was making its bi-monthly run to supply the islanders and 1500-strong British garrison. Master Tzu knew he was enjoying the best cabin, though he had spent little time there as the seasickness had launched him topside before the ship had even gotten underway from Chile. The Master's stomach lurched once more, and he forced his gorge back down as he gazed at the freezing sea. A gust of wind

blew his parka open and chilled him to the core. “No emperor in his right mind should ever want this place – much less fight for it,” he murmured. The drunken Falklanders stumbled by, and one of them made to piss off the side, succeeding only in drenching himself in his own urine and laughing about it. Barbarians. Truly barbarians, thought Master Tzu, resting his head on the comforting chill of the handrail and waiting to vomit again.

By morning, the Atlantic Conveyor II was docked portside at Stanley. Master Tzu welcomed the stationary horizon queasily, contemplating the charmless, hilly, windswept landscape that was the Falkland Islands. He wondered, not for the first time, at the folly of man. “Wise is he who knows what is truly worthless,” he said to himself, and made a mental note: Perfect for the second edition. Must jot that down and discuss with my publisher. A small group gathered at the base of the brow, waving to him. Ah, thought Tzu, the dreaded welcoming committee. Bowing perfunctorily in the general direction of the ship and cursing the captain’s ancestors and the miserable boat in classic Cantonese, Tzu made his way gingerly down to the dock. May the gods smile on me and allow the damned weather to improve for my flight out, he implored. “Mister Tzu, welcome to Port Stanley and to the Falklands. How was your trip?” inquired one who introduced himself as Rex Hunt, the Governor. “It was...enlightening,” replied the Master, choosing his words carefully. The man is a donkey, he thought. How could a civilized person imagine that anyone from the Middle Kingdom would enjoy even a moment coming to this freezing wasteland? A second man, florid and smelling of beer, thrust his hand forward: “G’day there, Sun. I’m Bob Mackenzie. You got my fax? We are all looking forward to hearing from an expert like you. It’s been twenty years since the war, but nobody’s forgotten it, y’know.” Ah, this must be the funder of this venture, Tzu noted, remembering the brief from his Hong Kong consulting firm.

Mackenzie was one of the *nouveau riche*, governing council member, beneficiary of the new fish-based wealth enjoyed by the kelpers since the 1982 war turned this impoverished semi-colony into a profitable enclave. Master Tzu grinned as he recalled the briefing paper's term of art: the “squidocracy,”¹ enriched by the soon-to-be-calamari squid frequenting the chilly waters around the islands. To Tzu, this seemed a better nickname for Falklanders than the traditional “kelper,” as there was something vaguely slimy about the man. Slimy or not, the ancients had written that “the donkey is the ridden, not the rider.” More clever words, he thought, making another mental note for the second edition of his book, working title “The Art of Love, War, and Everything Else.” His publisher was promising a big advance.

The thought of seafood made Tzu’s stomach churn painfully, and he quickly turned his attention to his scheduled lecture. “It is truly delightful to finally arrive,” Tzu said to his interlocutors in his delicate, formal English, “and if it would not be too much trouble, could a place be found where I could work on my talk for tonight?” His greeters scrambled to comply, whisking Master Tzu to a new – and thankfully immobile – hotel room in downtown Stanley. He ordered tea and dry toast from room service, ruefully acknowledging that it would be the ghastly black drink favored by the British and not the delicate green tea of his homeland – but at least it would be hot.

Master Tzu then settled back on the bed to review his notes on the accursed conflict he had been invited to discuss. Yes, the points were quite clear. A troubled year, 1982. Long history to the dispute. Galtieri and the murderous junta unpopular. Economy going down the tubes in both Buenos Aires and London. No mandate from heaven here. Both the Argentine and British leaders were guilty of ghastly mistakes, and poor judgment, but as he had written many centuries before, once battle was engaged the calculus in favor of a British victory had

been clear. But how to impart such important lessons to these buffoons? Tzu comforted himself with the image of the large stack of dollars to be earned, until the exhaustion from his voyage got the better of him and he dozed off.

A sharp tap on the door woke him. Master Tzu, disoriented in the now-dark room, heard a voice through the door: “Mister Sun? Mister Sun? I’ve come to take you to the lecture.” Tzu sat up, feeling better than he had in days. “Yes, yes, I will be right there. Please, I will be in the lobby in 5 minutes.” Master Tzu hurriedly brushed his teeth, and remembering the chill, pulled on his parka and headed downstairs.

The drive to the Falklands Island Community School was short and dark, and the driver – apparently some minor squidocrat -- was chatty, pointing out bullet-scarred walls still unrepaired from the war and effusing about “kicking Argie ass.” Master Tzu merely sniffed, nodded absently, and stared out the Land Rover’s window. The school auditorium was packed, and Mackenzie, fish magnate extraordinaire, greeted him effusively: “Mister Sun, we’re all set for you. I’m right chuffed to have you inaugurate this first Falkland Liberation Memorial Lecture. I think we’re almost all here, all 2500 islanders. We closed the pubs to make sure they all came. Let’s get on stage and I’ll do the needful and introduce you...” The fishmeister -- as Tzu had begun to think of him -- led him up to the flag-bedecked stage – they had even procured a Chinese flag, albeit hung upside down. Well, at least they tried, Tzu thought charitably.

From the stage, he blinked at the bright stage lights, struggling to peer out at the audience. He heard the clank of cans and clink of bottles. Can these British do nothing without alcohol, Tzu wondered, and then, more strategically, eyeballed the podium as potential cover from projectiles. You can never tell with the barbarian proletariat, he

cautioned himself. Mackenzie had almost wrapped up a particularly vacuous introduction. Standard stuff, noted the Master. “Great honor for Stanley, a Major Military Strategist, ‘Art of War,’ standard reference, ancient wisdom from the East, Liddell Hart refined the concepts, yadda yadda.” Master Tzu started at the mention of Liddell Hart, clenching his fists: “May a thousand dragons in hell eat that dishonorable plagiarist’s liver,” he muttered under his breath. “For this kind of insult, Ch’i Consulting is doubling my fee!”

Master Tzu stood behind the podium and waited for the crowd to settle. One islander, obviously inebriated, stood and bellowed, “We want Clausewitz! Bring in the German!” before collapsing drunkenly back in his seat. Mackenzie stood and yelled “Okay, you wankers, shut your bleedin’ gobs. Let ‘im speak!” Tzu winced and quietly cursed his own ancestors for having reproduced and thus fating him to come to this place. The call to attention had the required effect, however, and the crowd paused expectantly. Tzu seized the initiative and dived into his prepared remarks:

“Thank you so much for that kind introduction. I am delighted to be here,” he lied smoothly. “I have been invited to comment on the Falkland battle between the warlord Galtieri and his opponent, the warlord Thatcher.” Tzu still recoiled at the thought of a female emperor. The heavens could not support such a revolution. Women are too bloodthirsty and cruel. In battle, they allow no quarter and fight to the death. But I will cover that in the new edition of the book. “Those of you who have read my book” – Tzu doubted anyone had, and he had brought a gross of copies to sell after the program – “will understand that the essence of victory is knowledge: of your enemy, of yourself, of the situation. Such knowledge allows the commander to adapt to the changing circumstances of war, seeking to defeat not only the enemy’s forces but also his strategy.”

Master Tzu looked up and met only vapid stares from the front row. He was losing them after only 30 seconds. Time to turn on the Eastern mysticism. Tzu continued: “The essence of strategic success is to harness both morale and orthodox operations in support of your objectives. In Chinese, this tension is between the dimension of ch’i, or spirit, and cheng, or military engagement. Adroit combinations of ch’i and cheng are the key to victory, but both require accurate knowledge of the enemy’s dispositions and plans and effective concealment of ones own.”² Tzu paused to gauge the Falklander’s reaction. Ah, good, he noted, the oriental shtick won them over. Some of the sober ones were even taking notes.

He pressed on. “But in understanding the enemy’s dispositions, intentions, plans and intelligence, both the Argentine and British warlords fared poorly, at least at the outset. This lack of understanding led to a war that was, fundamentally, the fruit of poor estimates on both sides.” Time to caveat, Master Tzu thought. “I will not go into the details of the centuries of disputed sovereignty of the Falkland or Malvinas Islands. You are more familiar with the history than I. Let us, however, acknowledge that Thatcher and her predecessors underestimated the intensity of the Argentine attachment to these” -- Tzu paused, searching for the right word – “to these rugged islands. Decades of desultory diplomacy indicated to the Argentines that battle was the only way to conquest. British officials did not recognize the willingness of the Argentine public to support a military seizure of the islands in the midst of economic and political turmoil.”³ The Argentines could and did argue that war was a righteous response to the willful blindness of their adversaries, and that going to war was in accord with the will of heaven.”⁴

Tzu knew he was on thin ice with this audience, but days of travel discomfort had made him more than normally combative. “The British thoughtlessly demonstrated weakness and

lack of resolve to the Argentines. Throughout the decades before the conflict, Great Britain had weakened itself militarily. It had sold its final large aircraft carrier in the 1970's, and dispersed its high performance aircraft to land bases. A ministerial report in 1981, the Nott Defense Review, recommended the same fate for the smaller aircraft carriers Hermes and Invincible. I need not remind this audience that had those recommendations been implemented, it is highly unlikely that warlord Thatcher could have dispatched the task force to the Falklands.”⁵

Tzu continued: “In addition, let us not forget that the year before the battle, the British decided to withdraw the last of their warships – the icebreaker Endurance – from the South Atlantic. At the same time, Thatcher’s parliament voted to deprive the third and fourth generation Falklanders – almost half the island population -- of their Commonwealth citizenship. These actions indicated an apparent weakening of the British ch’i to defend the Falklands. Argentine warlord Galtieri no doubt weighed these factors when estimating British resolve,” Tzu concluded.⁶

The kelpers were growing restless, uncomfortable with Tzu’s underscoring the still-tenuous British attachment to their islands. Tzu stabbed at the air for emphasis: “Moreover, the Argentine estimates of terrain, of weather, of forces were not unreasonable in the short term, and Galtieri took a calculated risk that he could defeat the British and conquer the islands without battle – the acme of the general’s art. Let us briefly note the Argentine advantages. The islands are much closer to Argentina than they are to Britain, allowing the Argentines a tremendous proximity advantage. Their ships need did not need to travel far, their aircraft could attack from the mainland. Argentina enjoyed an impressive air force with over 250 modern aircraft and advanced missiles. Many of their pilots were also trained by the

skilled Israeli warlords – a decided advantage.”⁷ “And,” Tzu smiled, “the Argentines obviously had read my book: they attacked their adversary where he was unprepared, and when they were not expected. They occupied the field of battle first, and brought the enemy to the fight on their own terms.”⁸ Would that the Argentines had read the damned book more than once; they surely would have been more successful, Tzu mused to himself.

Master Tzu paused for breath. The audience had been nodding in agreement with his assertions, waiting for the other shoe to drop. “Of course,” he continued, “the successful general wins his victories without erring, and conquers an already defeated enemy. This, Galtieri failed to do. Galtieri also lost the favor of heaven by failing to disrupt his enemy’s alliances, a principal source of the enemy’s strength.”⁹ His government and ministers calculated that Argentina would enjoy continued support from this United Nations body, support from the other weak and aggrieved states, and, most importantly, the support of warlord Reagan in keeping Britain from battle. In this they were quite mistaken,”¹⁰ noted Tzu, “given that by the end of the first day of the invasion this United Nations council and the warlord Reagan’s ministers were moving to condemn the aggression and support Britain.”¹¹ Master Tzu paused for emphasis: “Let me repeat what I advocated to generations of my countrymen: It is a doctrine of war not to assume the enemy will not come, but rather to rely on one’s readiness to meet him; not to presume that he will not attack, but rather make oneself invincible.”¹²

Tzu shifted his weight behind the podium, and removed his glasses for effect. “To this point, the Argentine warlord had calculated responsibly and the preponderance of strength was in his favor. However, the battle had not yet been truly engaged even as late as April 3 when warlord Thatcher sent her warships to attack. I have written that ‘as water shapes in

accordance with the ground, so an army manages its victory in accordance with the situation of the enemy.’ And once the enemy has embarked against you, it is essential that you adjust your own strategy to his.” Master Tzu sighed, and put his glasses back on. Warlord Galtieri’s failure to adjust to this fact was his – and ultimately his nation’s – undoing.”¹³

“In battle, the sovereign must be quick to act,” Tzu continued. “Thatcher and her advisers made their own calculations expeditiously, and by the end of the first day chose battle instead of accommodation. Why is this so?” Tzu asked rhetorically. “‘Cause we’re better than those bloody bastards!” came the shout from the audience. Tzu began to regard these interruptions as tiresome, and cut off the expected applause, interjecting:

“Hardly. There are many concrete reasons. The first is intelligence, or, more precisely, a lack thereof. While Galtieri supposed and calculated and mused, British ministers obtained foreknowledge of events by intercepting Argentine communications days before the invasion.¹⁴ General Galtieri, however, remained in the land of supposition and violated a cardinal principle of intelligence. His troops and commanders knew nothing about the terrain of the Falklands, were unprepared for the cold, and lacked appropriate clothing or shelter. These forces also lacked sufficient food and ammunition, and had no information about what weapons the British might have with them.¹⁵ Despite having confronted his enemy for many years, struggling for victory in a decisive battle, Galtieri remained ignorant of his enemy’s situation. Such a man is neither a king nor a general nor a sovereign, is completely devoid of humanity, and no master of victory.”¹⁶ The assembled crowd roared their approval. Master Tzu quieted them with a gesture, and continued:

“Warlord Thatcher’s forces had technical superiority, and were committed to the battle ahead, flexible, with extensive equipment, modern tactics, and excellent training. The

obligations and exercises these forces had undergone as part of NATO had prepared them for battle. They enjoyed a fine balance ch'i and cheng – of morale and disposition of forces. Moreover, they had a strategy to reclaim the islands, something their opponents did not.” Master Tzu’s audience strained forward to hear his words. “The British strategy was simple and coherent: contain the enemy, defend the fleet, and keep the initiative.”¹⁷ Tzu paused thoughtfully, then resumed speaking: “The sailing of the British task force was well known, and its progress widely reported. Instead of using the time to improve defenses, such as lengthening the airfield at Stanley to accommodate advanced fighter aircraft, Argentine forces merely sat and waited for their enemy to arrive.”¹⁸ Indeed, it seemed that the Argentines had ceased calculating for victory. As I have written, ‘with many calculations one can win; with few one cannot. How much less chance of victory has one who makes none!’”¹⁹

Master Tzu lowered his voice. The audience was hushed, sensing that his remarks were concluding. “Once the British Task Force arrived at these islands April 25, the calculation of forces had inalterably changed. The British were like water, adapting and flowing on the ground, purposefully and vigorously.”²⁰ They used elite forces to obtain intelligence, conducted raids to confuse and disorient the enemy, and air and naval gunnery to wear down the entrenched Argentines, as water wears at earth. As the water lapping at the shore, so British landing forces landed virtually unopposed at San Carlos.”²¹

Tzu decided to ad lib, and elaborate upon the water metaphor. “If the British were like water, the Argentines were like ice: rigid and fragile. They continued with a poorly estimated air strategy, attempting to destroy the fleet even after the British troops landed. Brave men in aircraft sank four British warships and two merchant ships, and damaged ten others. But inflicting such damage cost them 72 aircraft, to say nothing of the loss of the battleship

Belgrano and so many of her crew, and the hundreds of ground troops.²² Again we see the cost of mistaking estimates, bad or no intelligence, and bad or no strategy,” Tzu argued. “In the end, the ice shattered and had no form.”

The auditorium was silent, in the thrall of painful memories of the dead and wounded. Master Tzu, too, was moved as he reflected again on the necessarily painful results of war. He had witnessed many acts of military folly in his long career, but few came close to the absurdity of warring over these barren isles. Tzu looked up and broke the heavy silence: “The key in battle is to know the enemy and know yourself. If you do, in a hundred battles you will never be in peril. If you are ignorant both of your enemy and yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril.²³ My friends, the Battle for the Falklands began in disdain, was fuelled by miscalculation, and was finally paid for in blood – the blood of young men led by warlords and hegemons. One side succeeded, as it could. Another failed, as it must.”

“We are left, then, with two questions: was the battle well joined? And was this a battle that should have been joined? In answer to the first, it is clear that the more skillful combatant was victorious in its calculations, in its shape, in its deft harnessing of the tension between ch’i and cheng. It could not have been otherwise than a British victory. Ultimately, the warlord Galtieri sought the wrong battle, and sought to exchange his domestic strife for foreign adventurism. War distracts, it does not assuage. Even victory in the Falklands could not reverse Argentina’s high unemployment, high inflation, and abuses of the populace by the government.”²⁴ Tzu paused. “Let me end with a quote from my book which sums up the lesson: ‘a sovereign cannot raise an army because he is enraged, nor can a general fight because he is resentful. For awhile an angered man may again be happy, and a resentful man

again be pleased, but a state that has perished cannot be restored nor can the dead be brought to life.’²⁵ I ask you all to reflect on this passage. Recognize that even though no state perished during the Battle for the Falklands, the dead from both sides still cannot be reanimated. And ask yourselves if the heavens would smile on this result. Thank you.”

The crowd stood groggily to its feet, applauding, as the fishmeister pumped Master Tzu’s hand onstage. “Marvelous. Bloody marvelous!” Mackenzie effused. Tzu was gratified to note a group of students edging closer with copies of “The Art of War” (the hardcover edition, no less!) in hand for his autograph. He gestured toward them in an effort to escape Mackenzie’s utterly unappealing invitation to go down to the pub. Tzu waded into his group of young fans, pulling out his Mont Blanc to sign a series of flyleaves. They all wanted him to sign using Chinese ideographs, as if doing so made his ideas more authentic. Ah, well, Tzu mused, this most certainly beats working for Prince Li Pen back in 200 BC. He had barely escaping Guangzhou alive after Li Pen had had misapplied his principles, lost his kingdom, and come looking to settle scores with old Master Tzu. Even the misbegotten Falklands looked better than had Guangzhou that day.

His squidocrat driver appeared at Tzu’s side. “Here is your ticket for tomorrow’s flight to Punta Arenas. Weather looks good, and the flight should leave as scheduled,” he said reassuringly. Master Tzu clutched the scrap of cardboard to his heart, apologizing to his ancestors for his earlier lack of respect and beseeching them to keep the skies clear. “Now could we please return to my hotel?” Tzu asked politely. “I wish to be ready to depart as soon as possible tomorrow. And is there anywhere on this island where I could get a cup of green tea?”

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